

An Assignment in Overcoming the Terrifyingly Familiar(Part 2)

By: A.X. Bueno

“I-I can’t believe that actually freed us. Nice shots Howell! Now let’s get this beatdown underway!” Rico shouts bolstering though his slightly quivering body betrays the confidence in those words.

Regardless of the realness of his confidence level the harp seal knows that he has a vicious fight ahead of him now that he’s free of the ghost serpent’s squeezing coils. Using his telekinesis Rico picks up several large chunks of debris and hurls them at the ghost. The first two hit it directly and cause it to hiss in pain but the next three fly right through it as it goes intangible. The Hawaiian Monk Seal, Howell meanwhile has been trying to get a good shot with his hard light missiles and is about to fire one when the hiss makes him freeze. His retro spaceship construct reverts back to its original form as a hard light flipper that’s now a mixture of various colors of terror(reds, yellows, shades of black, etc.) as he becomes lost in memory. While he’s reliving his terror Rico keeps hurling rocks and using his awesome speed to dodge the ghost’s scaly coils and own telekinetic onslaught of counter debris.

“Woah! That brick almost hit me square in the head. Hey Howell could I get some help over here? Howell? Oh come on, please don’t tell me you’re freezing up again. HOWELL! I NEED SOME HELP HERE!!”

At the word help Howell snaps back to the present reality and immediately fires a red ray of searing light at their spectral opponent. It hisses again while recoiling in pain. It then lunges at Howell while the monk seal stands there motionless and unsure what to do but Rico is able to get him out of the way with his super speed and the massive ghost serpent phases through a partially broken rock wall to somewhere neither seal can see right now. This gives both of them a relief that the ghost hunters know is only minutes long at best.

“Whew! There’s no way it actually fled...right?” The swift harp seal asks as he’s getting back up off the ground, wiping a bead of sweat from his gray furred forehead.

“N-not a chance. It-it’s gotta be looking for a new angle of attack. We should leave though, come back with a whole class to handle it. I’m not... I wasn’t ready to handle something like this, not again.”

“I asked you earlier if you were sure you could handle this! I double checked if you were ready for this kind of S Grade threat!! I should have known that you were trying to put on a brave face-

GAHhH!” The harp seal is angrily shouting though not directly at Howell even if his words are partially aimed at him.

“I’m...I’m really sorry but I think I’m alright now. I think I’m ready to properly kick off this fight. Now-**NnnANHH** LOOK OUT!!”

Out of one of the corners in the currently cracked ceiling of this underwater room emerges the ghost and foremost it’s reptilian maw with long spectral fangs, a forked tongue and a black abyss behind that rushing right for them. The monk seal barely manages to spring into action and shove Rico out of the way of the maw in time. The ghost serpent missing them passes easily through the floor as the two seals try to recompose themselves with both looking out for the ghost now. Rico spots it this time with the infrared of his tri-vision goggles and Howell sees it with his own enhanced vision when Rico points. It phases through a kelp covered wall, malicious determination in its dead, blank eyes as it charges again with both ghost hunters dodging it a little easier this time.

“Alright, it missed us again. When it comes from us this time I say you blind it with some burning light and I hit it with a shock dart. That should damage it and stop it from going intangible long enough to prepare the ghost trapper jar so we can put a solid stop to its haunting. Sound good?” Rico spills out his intended plan and Howell nods his furless head in approval.

“Sure does. Let's go for maneuver 11-84 to make this easier.”

“Smart thinking. It’s time for Round 2 with long, dead and scaly!” Rico shouts into the water confident the ghost is hearing him.

The two seals then huddle up together back to back with Howell adjusting his natural vision to be X-ray and Rico using his goggles to do the same. This time they’re more prepared for the enormous ghost rushing them, able to better see where it’s coming from. It rushes them several more times with snapping jaws and intending death in its every motion which seem to be getting faster and faster. The ghost hunting duo try their hardest to land another solid blow on the increasingly speedier giant serpent but its ghostly form only gets grazed at best as it manages to outpace them both with increasing ease now. On its fourth attempt to catch them both in those deathly jaws it grazes the two on their bottom flippers, for Howell his right and Rico his left. A little bit of blood spills for both out of the small rips in their UMBRA uniforms as Howell looks in horror at the minor wound and gives out a shrill bark while Rico winces and groans in pain, his wound being a bit bigger comparatively.

“**AHHHNN, FUCK!** I’m not sure how long we can keep this up, none of our hits are landing right and I’m getting tired of dodging this monster. How...about...you?” Rico pants between

those last few words, not used to fighting in the field and that plus the effort put in by him in this fight is catching up to him.

“It...it hurt us! It hurt you, I’M- WE’RE BLEEDING! We...I shouldn’t be making these kinds of slip ups. I’m supposed to be a professional... be better than this. I have to be.” Howell says more to himself than to Rico as he rubs his front flippers against fur he should know isn’t there before continuing to look out for their ghostly foe who disappeared only so it can try to shock them by re-emerging to rush them again from a point somewhere in the walls.

“Come on bro, don’t think like that. This isn’t some run of the mill ghost, he’s tough and you’ve got history with it even if I don’t really know what that is between you two. Still though, we’re strong and we’ve got skills. We’ll beat this spectral bastard and get through this! Okay?!”

“...O-Okay!”

I wouldn’t be so sure about that, feeble hunter! For you or the fresh meat you brought with you. Like I said, you’re in my world now and I don’t intend to just let you leave. Especially not when I’ve had a taste of one of you. I don’t like leaving my meals unfinished.

The ghastly leviathan seemed like it was going for another charge attack and the seal duo were prepared for that with Rico having a shock dart in hand ready to throw at it when it was within range. While Howell has his hard light flipper charged with energy and is now a mix of yellow and blue also ready to counterattack feeling a bit more reassured in their situation. However the ghost then does something not quite expected, as it freezes over the wall it’s phasing through midway by exerting the cold in its spectral presence. Then it proceeds to go back into the wall it was phasing through confusing the seal duo until it comes with its head blasting out the other solid side reminding them of its immense, all-encompassing size with how it appears to be at two sides of the room they’re in at once with no signs of visible strain on its face or phantom scales. There starts to be an otherworldly glow emanating from its mouth as it seems to pool energy there.

The energy coagulates into a large ball larger than any kind used for sports and almost the size of a grown adult which is then fired as a beam of pure, concentrated energy. Both seals notice this too late and are promptly blasted back by the ghostly energy blast. Spared from more serious injuries by Howell creating a spherical shield of orange hard light both ghost hunters still get some more cuts and bruises as they almost collide with the now exposed and sizzling ocean floor. The ghost serpent is somewhat surprised and disappointed to see the seal duo both still alive but not undeterred as it attempts to smack both Rico and Howell into the quickly remoistening bedrock and rubble with its thick tail. Rico uses his super speed to get himself and Howell out of the way in time then his telekinesis to try and get a rock to be ahead of where they

are so it can connect with the phantom beast's tail and maybe do some damage but the ghost sees what he's going for and stops his tail before it can collide with the placed rock. Then it starts talking again.

I must say feeble hunter you've grown considerably more resilient... more powerful since last time. Last time that beam was able to take down you and two of the other fools that thought they could successfully hunt and catch me. Of course they failed spectacularly as did you but what could be expected of a couple of such an inexperienced group... you were all like fish in a barrel. Easy to catch and kill, the others just enabled you to get lucky. Such a waste of their lives."

"How DARE YOU!! You don't get to badmouth my team, you disrespectful murderous specter, I'll show you a waste!" Howell shouts with righteous anger before firing off a volley of light beams, most of which miss but two manage to sizzle against the ghost serpent's scales causing a faint amount of damage but the ghost isn't too bothered. Leaving Howell to feel disappointed in what seems like an almost hopeless situation.

Again, luck allowed that to happen. How much luck do you really think you have left, feeble hunter? Are you sure you can succeed where you and your whole team previously failed?"

Suddenly a rock hits the spectral leviathan from its other side reminding it that Rico is there before he follows it up with a punch at super speed which makes the ghastly beast wince.

"I don't know what the hell happened in the past, mainly because neither of you want to just say it outright instead of making vague threats or references to whatever went down but I'm hoping we make it through so you can tell me. That we can finish what your team started by finishing off this ghost!"

"But nothing we're doing is damaging it much. It's an S Grade ghost and I tried to fight it with a whole team last time and we weren't enough and I'm still not enough now! Maybe it's right, maybe I just got lucky to have survived and that luck was wasted on a fool like me." Howell stands still now, the weight of that past encounter still heavy on his mind and continuing to grow heavier thanks to previous experiences currently going through his mind and the ghost leviathans mocking words.

"Listen, WE can't afford any drawbacks or loss of resolve if we're going to stay alive. Don't let that monster use your past to make you doubt yourself or back down. We've got to keep fighting. I told you we'd beat this spectral bastard and I absolutely intend to keep a promise like that. After all I'm in this too, you're not on your own. Neither of us is." Rico grasps Howell's right flipper firmly but gently to get his focus back in the present then gives him a reaffirming nod to say "you can do this!".

*Hmmm... I like your fighting spirit, meat. Fierce and dripping with even more confidence than those who usually try to combat me like the fearful **mess-sssss** next to you. Let's see how it tastes compared to his and theirs.*

It takes both Rico and Howell a few seconds to understand what that truly means as the ghost serpent starts his next move to get what he wants and by the time either seal realizes it there's almost no time to react. The ghost serpent wriggles its tail around and through Howell's body using a mix of both its abilities to chill the air and phase through objects to remove most of the heat from around him, freezing Howell on the spot. Rico is shocked by this unsure what to do until he sees that huge tail begin to come toward him and he tries to dodge it and prepare to telekinetically throw more stuff at it but despite super speed giving him the ability to react he's ultimately surrounded by the serpent on all sides as it grips him. He did manage to move a few inches, to get a few bits of debris left from that energy blast along with some silt from the now cooled floor a few inches off the ground with his telekinesis but it was a futile effort for he is now completely trapped by the ghost serpent's gigantic, powerful tail once more which tightens around him hard as he squirms in vain.

You know it doesn't feel appropriate to eat here in your world. Last time I wanted the satisfaction of playing with and cornering my prey on their own grounds but now I don't think I have enough to worry about from either of you that I couldn't just leave this mundane place behind. Go back to my place for a slower and more preferable dining experience. For me anyway, for you it'll be an intense agony that you won't have much time to truly contemplate, only feel coarse through your blubbery body.

With that the serpent has finished speaking in the minds of the seal duo and it then proceeds to close its dead eyes and concentrate to create a dark glow that's about two shades of crimson darker than some of the ghost leviathan's more visible scales. The glow goes on to consume the remains of the underwater castle room as it spreads out from the serpent and does its best to surround everything including Rico and Howell who can only watch this happen with bodies that can't do so much as tremble and eyes filled with pure terror. In under a minute the world, the mundane world Howell and Rico knew is gone and in its place is the world the serpent comes from. It's a world full of various shadows that shimmer ominously in the distance, the ground(where there is actual ground) is rocky and brown with some streaks of red, there's a purple hue to the sky and air along with an oppressive heat and humidity all around. All the two seals combined experience with UMBRA Academy never quite prepared them for the hell they've been transported to.

With the heat around him the ice encasing Howell is starting to melt slowly but it's not melting fast enough to spare him from reliving a terrifyingly familiar sight in an intimidating world that he's heard about but never been to or seen before, the only thing he understands about

his surroundings is what that ghastly leviathan is doing to Rico. Rico is still struggling and squirming to break out of the ghost serpent's massive, strong and steady coils. Struggling hard enough that his still fresh wounds start to drip with blood that goes a little over his gray fur, uniform and the serpents' multicolored and multi-dimensional scales. The ghost gives one last firm, powerful squeeze and Rico's body goes limp, alive but now unconscious with his entirely black eyes going from showing much fear as an eye without a lens can to being still and closed. Howell's eyes though are showing all the fear they can again as the ice around him starts to crack and light shines through those cracks and especially around his hard light flipper which is glowing a mix of red, dark blue and black as the ghost serpent descends upon Rico's unconscious body.

The serpent sinks its fang into Rico's shoulder and in Howell's mind he sees a rewind of the fate of one of his old UMBRA classmates Ursa along with several others like Aaron and Crystal, the serpent biting into each of them in the same manner as he does to Rico right now. They were trying to save each other and themselves but ultimately only Howell was fortunate enough to make it back to the surface along with Albright's bitten corpse that he thought had made it too. What had happened next gave Howell the power he has now to fully break out of the ice holding him with a sizzling blue and red burst of light and heat. Freeing himself in time to see the same translucent marshmallow looking substance, Rico's soul, start to leave his body through the bite wound made by the ghost serpent. Leaking out of the wound and his body in a similar way to the way it leaked out of Albright's wound back on the beach almost a year and a half ago only this time it's not so much leaking as much as being sucked out and this time Howell can do more to ensure his partner's survival as well as his own.

Howell blinks his vision into infrared to see that there is still some heat left in Rico's body but the harp seal is losing it and fast as the clear essence of his soul is being sucked up by the ghost serpent's large, toothy maw. In a haste to do something Howell shoots off some light rays and an unintentional hard light construct in the form of a sea otter's head. They all collide with the meal distracted specter making it drop Rico and the bits of his soul it was in the process of taking which all proceed to flow back into the unconscious ghost hunter's battered body. Howell wastes little time in rushing to Rico's side to make sure he's still alive and to keep the ghost at bay as he examines the seriousness of the wound right before he checks for a pulse with his solid flipper, the right one. To the monk seal's relief Rico's heart is still beating and the wound isn't bleeding too bad or spewing out bitten pieces of soul. Rico will be okay in spite of his wounds and that fills Howell's heart with a renewed determination to end this before that has the chance to change.

“THAT’S IT!! That’s The LAST Taste You’re Gonna Get Of ANYBODY Especially Anbody Close To Me! I’m done letting you haunt me, letting you hurt me and those I care about, you murderer! You brought me to your realm and that was a **FATAL** Mistake!”

HSSSSSSSSSSSS

The ghost serpent merely hisses in response, now tired of this feeble hunter and his unceasing attacks and interruption of its meal. This seal duo has proven to be more of an annoyance than anticipated and so the ghost too frustrated now to talk instead focuses on both ghost hunters' destruction as another energy beam is being prepared to fire from that ghastly maw. Howell meanwhile is also preparing an attack of his own, a move he has spent months perfecting in UMBRA Academy's state of the art training room. It took about 10 months to adjust to his new powers and create it and then an additional 3 to hone it into a proper signature move even if he's rarely used it on account of how much damage it can do and how risky it is. Here though, in the world the ghost serpent comes from, with only it, Howell and Rico in the blast zone he can use it without any concern of harming some innocent bystander or causing serious property damage.

So as the spectral leviathan continues to charge its potentially deadly beam while knowing that its realm is too unfamiliar and inconsistent for the seal duo to run away from it in a way they'll survive, Howell begins to channel his energy into a hard light duplicate. And as the duplicate starts to take shape and accumulate more power an incredible chain made of the same energy as the duplicate begins to form out of both its and Howell's bodies growing and growing until both sides meet and link them together. When Howell and his energy double become truly ready the ghost serpent finishes charging its deadly blast and it manages to attack first. This time though Howell is more than ready and with his double creates a more substantial shield that protects the seal duo and duplicate from the might of the ghost serpents beam attack with hardly a crack in it. Then Howell goes on the offensive along with his duplicate, starting off their attack with a strong, light supported punch.

If Howell was the kind of character who shouted out his every attack before he did it he'd have screamed out "Get ready for the Nemesis Nova!" Or something like that he thinks as his fist hits the ghost serpent in one of its segments just below the jaw. However even if he doesn't call it that out loud in his heart and head Howell still considers that the official name of his move as his duplicate follows up his punch with one of its own a segment higher on the ghost's ginormous body. The two seals keep delivering a whole barrage of punches, perfectly in sync and one after another. They go both higher and lower with not one punch missing and with each punch the chain wraps more and more around this nightmare serpent's body until the chain is entangled more or less around the phantoms' entire body.

That signals to both the duplicate and original Howell that it's time for the final blow to this whole spectacular move. They nod to each other then walk back as far as what's left of the chain which makes the ghost serpent roar in displeasure and pain as that makes the chain tighter around it but neither of them cares for its protests or petty counterattacks after all it's done. Instead they

both cost their bodies in an extra layer of more concentrated light energy than lunge in unison towards the serpent's face. They both hit the serpent's face at the same time like worlds colliding with another and this sets off both the string of chains and the duplicate to create an awesomely powerful, impossibly condensed explosion that both feels like and resembles a supernova, expansion outwards and all.

While the light attacks from Howell may not have been as damaging as the monk seal would have liked, his Nemesis Nova was exactly as much of a finishing move as he hoped it would be. With all the damage the ghost serpent sustains from the combined barrage and explosion it loses both consciousness and its tether to its world of origin returning it and the two seal ghost hunters back to where this whole battle started, in the slightly wrecked underwater castle. While the ghost may have lost consciousness in between the forceful ejection from its world back to our mundane one Howell however manages to stay on his flippers long enough to both take out a ghost trapper jar from out of the remains of his pretty tattered now UMBRA Academy uniform. His grip on the jar is loose and he has to tighten it several times as he walks over to Rico who luckily and purposefully was out of the range of the explosion Howell unleashed. The harp seal is still unconscious but could come to any second and both seals need to get moving now that their foe is finally vanquished.

"Rico wake up. Wake up Rico...we...we did it! We knocked out that awful ghost. Need your help *phant* tr-trapping him though and getting out... of here. It took a lot out of me doing...that move." Howell says while carefully shaking the other seal who's eyes slowly open.

"Wah-what? Howell? Did we die?? Did... did you say we beat that ghost? Where are we?" Rico's mind is still swimming as he regains consciousness and Howell seeing him okay and slowly becoming aware of their incredible victory genuinely smiles for the first time in quite a while.

"We're not dead buddy. You...you were right, we won! We kicked that serpent's ass hard, together and now we just have to catch him in one of the jar, doing it by the book! We won! **WE DEFEATED THAT GHOST! WE BEAT IT, We Beat It, we beat it...we- ahahaaaa**" Howell doesn't get to fully finish his triumphant boasting and laughter before collapsing right on top of Rico who takes on his fellow seal's weight with an "oomph" with Howell exhausted but happy to that the source of so much heartache and trauma for him is finally overcome. The last sound Howell hears before he passes out is Rico's heart which is beating slowly at first but then stronger and his last thought before he passes out is "I kept him safe, kept him alive" as Rico meanwhile reaches for a special button in his less torn than Howell's suit.

"Thanks again for the lift and the assist. I'm sure if Howell was awake right now he'd-oh...welcome back to the land of the living, how was your nap, Solar Striker?" Rico says

smiling over Howell's groggy face as he reawakens and rubs his eyes, his earless head rising off Rico's lap.

"Huh? Why'd you use my codename? What happened? Where are we? Why do I feel us moving?" The hawaiian monk seal looks mainly up at Rico and briefly around but is still too frazzled by all that recently transpired to understand anything but that he's laying down with the exception of his head(which has risen slightly to look up) and Rico isn't and that he's comfortable and so is Rico seemingly. One thing he does notice though is that the cuts he could see before on the harp seal are now bandaged and clean with very few signs left on his gray fur of just how fresh those wounds are or maybe were.

"I called you by your codename because you're a hero, you luminescent powerhouse of a grump! As for what happened... after your explosion that knocked out that S Grade behemoth of a ghost and after telling me to trap it before you knocked out as well I did two things. Firstly I pressed the emergency beacon button on my UMBRA uniform which was thankfully intact in comparison to yours. Then I trapped the ghost in one ghost trapper jar and then stuck that inside another ghost trapper jar since that ghost was pretty powerful and with S Grade ghosts you can never be too careful...as you already know from experience. Just a few minutes after sending out the emergency beacon and double trapping that ghost rescue arrived, healed us up as best they could and now we're on the road back to UMBRA. Not bad for someone you considered an 'A Grade hunter at best', huh?

"Wait, wait, wait. We were rescued and are on the road? What about the van? If you're here... and I'm here and we're both in the backseat... then who's driving?!"

"That would be me... hello. It's good to hear you awake and at least somewhat aware now." A gruff reptilian male voice answers from the front of the new van Howell and Rico are passengers.

"Who said that??"

"Damn, you really are out of it. That happens to have been one of our rescuers, he who is currently driving us back to one of UMBRA's sub bases/academies so we can do a debriefing when we get there cause you know, there's no rest for the weary even when you take down a giant snake ghost that terrorized who knows how many people. At least we've got 20 minutes or so to mentally prepare ourselves for whatever we'll have to do next when we get there." Rico sighs in tired acceptance and knowledge of what awaits them while Howell continues to just stare at him in confusion with his black and brown eyes.

“Are you telling me that UMBRA’s got an academy here and apparently other agents around that are okay with going on underwater assignments and they made us come all the way out here instead? What the hell?!”

“That’s what I said too! That’s something I guess we can bring up to them when we get there the extra waste of resources to get **us** here hehehe. Still it’s good that those resources and guys like Ollie and Fynn are around and were able to get to us in time. We were running low on oxygen, only had about 40 minutes left and if they didn’t make it to us in 30 we might not have made it, owe them both our lives.”

“So where are they now?”

“I was getting to that. Since they drove their own UMBRA branded van out to reach the docks and neither of us is in the best condition to drive after how bad that ghost scraped us up Fynn took our van so you’ll get to meet and thank him back at the academy. As for Ollie, he happens to be our chauffeur, for right now anyway. Thanks again for that dude, you’ve been an incredible help!”

“It’s no problem Rico. We aquatics gotta look out for each other given how bad we get typecasted sometimes when it comes to assignments. Besides I know you’d take the wheel if you could but it’s for the best that you and your buddy rest up while you can.” Ollie flashes a beaked, toothless smile at the two seals through the rearview mirror as he drives and Howell getting a better look at him now realizes he’s a snapping turtle, probably an alligator snapping turtle judging by his size and how rough his skin looks. It’s hard to guess his age Howell thinks but if he had to try and place it he’d say the snapping turtle looked in his late 30’s or maybe early 40’s.

“Yeah. Thank you so much sir!” Howell shouts gratefully, being considerably more energized now than earlier. The monk seal may be a loner but he’s done his best to always be grateful and polite, mostly.

“No need to shout or use sir, bud. You can just call me Ollie or Oliver if you want to be formal.” The snapping turtle tips the olive green and gray brimmed cap that Howell just noticed as he quickly tilts it back into its snug position on his scaly head.

“Okay, Ollie.” Howell says surprisingly without hesitation then looks back to Rico with admiration who raises his eyebrows in confusion.

“Umm, why are you looking at me like that? Are you trying to examine my wounds deeper with those enhanced eyes of yours or something? Are you about to fall back asleep on me?”

“No, no I just... I’m just glad we both made it. You’ve helped give me a sense of ... peace and catharsis I haven’t been able to experience in a while. I abandoned you near the start of this assignment because I was scared and unsure about you but I was even more unsure about myself. You helped me anyway despite how cold I was being, how hard I tried to brush you off to do things on my own ‘cause I thought it would be easier that way and I was... I was wrong. I’m sorry for all that and now I owe you so much, I can’t even begin to thank you... for everything... you probably don’t even fully realize what you’ve done for me.”

“Well, uhh we were on an assignment and I saved both of our lives only after you saved mine, there’s not that much to it. You may have been a little... distant and I definitely don’t appreciate your attempt to ditch me with that phony errand or you trying continually to put on a brave face but I can kinda understand why you did what you did...kind of. You don’t owe me anythin-**hmmm**-!” Howell interrupts Rico before he can finish his final sentence by putting both his flippers on the back of Rico’s fuzzy head and pushing him closer as he maneuvered both himself and Rico into a kissing position.

Despite moving them both into that position Howell didn’t want to just catch Rico completely off guard so he leaves an inch of space but also makes his intentions clear. Rico quickly catches on to what’s happening and gives a small nod of approval allowing Howell to close the gap behind the two and their lips join in a kiss. Earlier Howell almost made an attempt to kiss Rico after a disorientating flashback was triggered in his mind making him want to gauge just how real things were when Rico’s inquisitiveness brought him back to the then present. This time however Howell is going for a kiss out of a sense of appreciation and jubilation at what he and Rico overcame together and Rico, while not fully understanding the reasoning, understands the actions and accepts Howell’s advance this time. The two keep their lips and flippers on each other for at least a few minutes savoring their contrasting touches, the warmth of each other and the safety and care they can elicit in each other. Of course like all good things even their tender kiss must end and so they break it off with their lips separating and Howell’s cool, furless(and in the case of one light based) flippers making their way off Rico’s head as his own furred flippers do the same from Howell’s but in between that they also hear a signaling cough.

“**Aheh-hem**. Sorry to interrupt but you know if you both want some privacy there’s a tinted glass barrier I can raise or if you want some... errr mood music for what’s going on back there I can provide that too. If it’d help keep you both comfortable and make things less **urmm**, awkward that is.” Ollie nervously rubs one of his thick nailed hands over his arm as he waits for the seals to react.

“Oh...uhhh, that’s okay Ollie. I just wanted to give Rico a bit of an owed thank you. Appreciate the courtesy though.”

“Of course! I just want you both to be comfortable.”

“Thanks for that Ollie! You’re a really good guy but yeah I think we’re fine.”

“Alright then. Let me know if that changes, guys.” The turtle winks at them both through the rearview mirror then turns his total focus back to the road.

“You know Howell, if you really want to pay back the debt you feel you owe me you could tell me the story of how that ghost knew you. That’s a story I’ve been waiting *oh so* excitedly to hear.” Rico says while looking right into Howell’s giving his best impression of puppy dog eyes but that’s hard to do when your eyes are almost completely black.

“I... *sigh* alright. I suppose if there’s anyone who deserves that story, the history between us and behind what just happened it’s you. Would you mind rolling up that tinted window Ollie? I’ll take that offer of privacy after all, please. I’ll tell you the story later if you want to hear it since I owe you too but it’s a pretty painful and personal one...one I’d like to tell one on one.”

“I understand and really don’t mind. I’ll give you some space to talk in private. I’ll let you know when we get there or you can knock on the glass when you’re done.” Ollie says before rolling up the tinted glass to let Howell tell his story.

Which he does for the next twenty five minutes or so as Ollie drives his UMBRA rental van through the ups and downs of the Seattle streets. He talks about the threat he and his team of then very recently graduated fellow UMBRA agents initially signed up for a mission to fight a spectral murder of crows that were nesting in a similar underwater castle to the one the seal duo just escaped. He then goes on to tell how what his team of rookies found was so much worse, that damned ghost serpent and continues on to tell how it absolutely overwhelmed all of them and slaughtered his team. Tells of their valiant but failed efforts to stop the powerful and unexpected ghost, about the brave sacrifices of Aaron and Crystal and Gallos and Ursa and how all their sacrifices just barely allowed him and Albright to escape with their lives or so he thought in Albright’s case.

He details his realization that the sea otter didn’t make it like he thought he did at the time before going on to mention both his and Albright’s injuries and then more importantly his encounter with that confusing Chimera. Howell is a bit more vague with the details regarding the Chimera especially with how much of an unknown he is to him but does tell the main parts about its mysterious arrival, the way it healed his injuries from that ghost serpent’s attacks just to give him new ones when he tried attacking that ‘Planes Seller of Dreams’. Howell goes on to talk about how terrifying and somewhat brutal an experience that was but also it allowed him to make a deal with the Chimera that gave him a great boost in power to what he has now. Several times

the monk seal has to pause in-between this grand narrative of the assignment, ghost serpent, and encounter with that Chimera that has haunted and plagued his motives and actions since that very tragic day. By the time Howell is done he sighs heavily as he feels drained but also a great relief washes over him, a relief at finally telling the story he gave only bits of to the heads of UMBRA when he had to debrief him after that catastrophe of an assignment almost a year and a half ago and then he looks at Rico in the present next to him in this van speeding towards another potentially painful debriefing.

“... I-I couldn't have even imagined... that's quite a survival story. I'm... I'm so sorry you went through all of that. It makes a lot of things today make a lot more sense. It doesn't excuse it all but I understand better now why you did and more importantly I understand you better now and... I'm sorry if I poked any old wounds.”

“Yeah, now you know... basically everything. I'm sorry if I hurt you but I hope you get now why I said I owe you so much. I shouldn't have been so cold to a teammate... to a friend. I should have- ” Rico cuts Howell off by pulling him into a nice, fuzzy hug.

“Hushhhh, you big blue softee. You've suffered enough without fretting about what you think you owe me or even worse, regrets. We're both alive, I'm here for you. You're free to ease up now, the only danger left is a bit of post assignment bureaucracy and I think that's considerably easier to handle than everything we did today, my driving included...*hehe*.” Rico chuckles as he backs off a few inches so he doesn't say all this into where Howell's ear would be if he had them then goes right back to embracing his fellow seal.

“You... you don't have to... I don't deserve-”

“I want to and you deserve so much more than you think. You're not responsible for anybody else's actions or what others choose to sacrifice including me. After everything you've been through you deserve some support... some love. You're incredible.”

“Th-Thank you... you're... *sob*... amazing. Truly an amazing... partner ***nyahhahahnnnn***.” Howell starts openly weeping over Rico's shoulder, unleashing a whole slew of emotions he's been bottling up.

It's been a little over a year since Howell last cried and last time it had been when he was completely alone after finishing a mission where he was still adjusting to his boost in power, just barely pulling out a win from his spectral opponent at the time. This time it's different, less to do with physical injury and a rough time controlling and utilizing his power(though the injuries are still present this time) and more to do with finally allowing himself to break and feel the weight of his experiences and wounds both old and new. Rico stays still for him, allowing his fellow

ghost hunter to safely fall apart in his arms and cry out some of his emotional baggage. He notices Howell's flipper change color again going from a melancholic mix of black and dark blue to a mix of gold, pink and a bit of a brighter blue to balance out the dark a bit better. Towards the end of Howell's crying the van grinds to a stop as the destination is reached, the Seattle site of UMBRA Academy which makes Ollie lower the tinted glass separating him from the two seals.

"Ummm... we've arrived. Do you two need a few more minutes to uhhh, get it all out?" He asks understandably concerned as there are still fresh flowing tears on Howell's face and Rico hasn't so much as flinched at the intrusion or their arrival.

".... Huh? Yeah, yeah. I'm good just give me a second to get myself...together." Howell says as he heats up his hard light flipper and uses it to dry his tears with a *sizzle*.

"You sure? There's no rush to get inside, I'm sure anyone would understand you two needing a few minutes all things considered." Ollie's hands are off the wheel and his head is staring away from the car's front window as he waits patiently for the two seal ghost hunters to decide their next move.

"I think we're both ready to move forward from all this, this whole assignment. Right, Solar Striker?"

"I know I am, Swift Aqueous. Let's head out."

There's an unbuckling of seatbelts, an opening and closing of doors and then all three of them are outside; Ollie, Rico and Howell. Once outside they all walk towards the academy at a fairly slow but steady pace, this academy is a decent size base-wise. Not too big or small and it sports the UMBRA logo of a tuxedoed ghost holding that rose along with having a ghostly tail and a spooky expression underneath which is the alternating purple and white letters spelling out UMBRA Academy. Howell sighs in relief soaking in the relatively familiar sight(the academy he went to was more on the larger side and had two training areas and a tennis court as opposed to this academy which has the one training area and a football field) but as he's taking in the big building and strolling towards the true end of his mission he spots something or rather someone who stops him in his tracks. He sees him just standing there casually behind a bush, not sure when he arrived or how long he's been waiting but he's there nonetheless, the terrifyingly familiar, ever shifting face of that Chimera. It stands there and when it notices Howell it locks eyes with him and analyzes him with the eyes of tiger, literally while Howell's left flipper goes a mix of black and orange signifying serious dread and concern.

"Oh gods. RICO! I...see him... I see him! He's come back for me!" Howell shouts and points in the Chimera's direction to try and get someone else to notice them.

“Wait, What?! Where is he? Why are you pointing like that? I don’t see anything from that direction besides bushes and grass.” Rico scratches his head in confusion as he tries to figure out what’s going on with his friend and fellow ghost hunter.

“He’s right there! He’s not even crouching, how on earth are you not seeing him?!”

“I seriously don’t see anyone there. I’m not sure how that is but I’m still going to be here for you even if I’m not quite sure what’s happening. If he endangers you or you truly feel in danger let me know, in the meantime maybe if we keep moving he’ll stay out here. I doubt he can beat that world class UMBRA Academy security.”

“Ugh! I might be in danger right now! I told you what he did to me last time. Who knows what he could do now.”

“Well so far you’re fine and I have a feeling if he moved to attack you I’d be able to tell. Whatever he’s doing... over there, I don’t think it’s a threat to you or anyone.” Rico says with confidence then gestures at Howell to keep walking surprisingly. Howell rejects this to stare at the Chimera some more with the intensity of a cat about to pounce on something which Rico let’s him do as he waits for the monk seal to be done with whatever he’s doing.

“He doesn’t see because I don’t want him to. I want no one to see me but you.” The Chimera silently mouths out these words for Howell to essentially lip read.

“I don’t understand. Why are you back for me now? What do you want?!” Howell silently mouths back, probably looking crazy to anyone else even Rico but right he’s too concerned by the figure only he seems to be able to see to care.

“I am here simply to verify that our deal was worthwhile. That you’ve maintained that unbeatable strength I helped provide. I would have hoped you’d be more amiable and less aggressive especially after such a tremendous victory.” The Chimera is examining Howell closely with more reptilian eyes now that make him feel like they’re seeing right into his soul and for as much as I know that’s possible, Howell thinks and then shudders at the thought and the Chimera’s unflinching stare.

“My...victory? How would you... are you spying on me?! Keeping tabs on me?! Also can you really blame me for being aggressive after last time?”

“Spying? Bahh, no! I don’t expect you to understand how I do what I do but as you yourself observed in our prior engagement you have no true idea of my capabilities. I have many, many

ways of gaining knowledge and what I want. Regardless you've been filling your role well from all I'm gleaming and that's all I needed to know. I don't foresee myself needing to return any time soon though the future can be quite surprising, even to one such as me." The Chimera says eyes glowing like when we fought on the beach only this time it's less intense and there's a tinge of emotion in its voice, a weird mix of pride and happiness and sorrow like a teacher wishing a student well before the next chapter of their lives. .

"Are you being serious right now?! You're here to simply check in, say hi and be cryptic and then basically say you're leaving forever!? WHAT IN ALL OF THE HELLS?!" Howell is enraged now by the continued crypticness as opposed to concerned and full of fear like before.

"**Sigh** Being right can be disappointing sometimes but nothing changes. I merely intend to do one more thing and then you shall be free of me again and the feelings I draw out of you... unless circumstances should happen to draw me back to you and this part of existence." The Chimera then proceeds to poke into the air as if searching for something, then when he stops he spreads his hands apart like he was showing off the size of a fish he caught and this allows a decently sized dark blue portal to be opened in the air.

"**Woah**... you're actually leaving just like that. Hmm... **WAIT**, there's so much I don't get! I'm sorry I yelled. I guess I was just... expecting more from you coming back, please stay a little longer." Howell cries out as if the gravity of what this could all mean just made its way to his brain.

The realization that the final opportunity he had to ask any final questions to this Chimera even if he'd never get any straight answers is closing just like that portal will. So much he'll have left to wonder about who the Chimera is, where it came from, the purpose it apparently assigned him, how deep was their deal exactly, did it really come to just to check up on him, all this and more will remain unknown to the monk seal now as the Chimera merely shakes its head at Howell's request for it to stay. However, it also doesn't immediately step right into the portal to continue on its way; instead doing something unexpected, the Chimera makes its hand glow dark blue and reaches for its own face, bringing its glowing hand an inch away from its muzzle which currently is a lynx's. Then it pulls its hand away from its face which causes what looks like a generic mask made out of the same color energy as surrounds its hand to practically pop off its face before that dissipates as does the energy around his hands. If Howell knew more about the Chimera he'd recognize that energy as magic and realize that a spell was just broken as Rico now witnesses as his eyes start staring first in confusion than excitement as the Chimera is now visible to him as well as Howell and possibly others though no one else seems to react like it's there.

“Oh...**MY GOSH!**” That’s the Chimera isn’t it?! It really is here! I almost don’t believe it but you did seem really deep in conversation with what I thought was just the air or something but wow! You really were seeing it, what’s it been saying to you? Why’s it here? Oh... it’s still here, please tell me it’s not leaving already. Excuse me Mr... Chimera-” Howell stops Rico by placing a flipper on the other seal’s eager shoulders in a way of non-verbally telling him to wait.

“What-why’d you...ohh!” Rico takes a second or two but realizes that Howell stopped him for a reason so he waits for both Howell and the Chimera to wrap things up.

“I’m grateful for the courtesy to keep going. Let me assure you primarily that I am quite real and very much need to continue on my way for reasons and to places I’m afraid I’ll have to leave you to speculate for other duties beckon. As for why I’m here, Rico, as I was explaining to your friend I came here mainly to check on his worthiness after the deal he was detailing to you earlier and to ascertain that his strength is as unstoppable as we both sought for it to be. **Both** of you also deserve praise and congratulations on your victory against that specter today, the two of you just accomplished more than you even realize through your noble efforts. I highly doubt I’ll need to return here.”

“Hmm I seeeee...looks like you have even more to tell me now, huh Howell?” Rico smiles in Howell’s direction settling for the Chimera’s answers believing he can get more info out of Howell.

“That concludes our business for now. May life treat both of you well, gentlemen.” Continuing their pattern of unexpected actions the Chimera stands in front of the still open portal to wherever its next destination is, does what seems like a proper military salute towards the seal duo before quickly leaving with the portal closing right behind them.

“Sooo... did you ever figure out what a man is?”

“Nope. Still don’t know.”

“On a more serious note, do you really believe that it’s not coming back here? Do you feel like you got proper closure with the Chimera?”

“I fulfilled the purpose, the price he’s saddled me with so far. So long as I do that he’ll continue to not concern himself with here and us. I suppose that along with beating that ghost serpent that’s as much closure as I can ask for.” Howell says these words but isn’t really sure where they come from because they don’t feel like his own yet they ring true regardless.

“... I can understand that. So you’re okay now? Are we good to go inside?”

“... yeah, Yeah. I’d say we are. I think Ollie is almost at the door actually so we should probably hurry. I’ll fill in the gaps of what you missed when we get in but after the debriefing, okay?”

“Sounds like a plan to me. Let’s get a move on!” Rico shouts and Howell nods his head in agreement.

Both Howell and Rico start rushing as fast as their flippers will let them and join Ollie near the door as he gives them a “what was keeping you two?” face to which Howell and Rico both say we’ll tell you later all.” Then all three of them proceed to walk through those academy doors together with the kind of relaxed ease that comes from having finally made it to your intended destination after a long, tiring journey. They check a nearby map on a corkboard lodged between a vending machine and a classroom and it tells them which room they should head to. It doesn’t take long at all for them to reach the large conference style room where assignment debriefings happen, Recall Hall is what most UMBRA agents call it including Ollie, the alligator snapping turtle as well as Howell and Rico. All three of them enter the room which has three chairs in the middle and then about 12 chairs a good amount of space away set up in a circle. Some of the chairs are filled by important UMBRA administrative staff like headmasters and their assistants but most are empty and instead there are monitors with the faces of those headmasters instead as they couldn’t make it all the way to Seattle so suddenly and instead chose to video call. One of the assistant headmasters, a middle aged goat, gestures for the three to have a seat and they do.

“Good afternoon. I see the rescue was a success and you two are both alive though a little worse for wear and your accompanying rescuer seems fine. I would hope the mission was a success despite the visible cuts and need of rescue.” Someone from one of the monitors speaks up to say, it’s hard to say who but the voice sounds feminine.

“It was indeed a success, ma’am. Ghost was neutralized and then trapped with no casualties but some difficulty. However, it wasn’t beyond me or my teammates’ capabilities.” Rico speaks up, not usually being a part of assignment debriefings but still having enough of an idea of how they go.

“And would you and your teammates please give your names and code names before the debriefing continues further.” This time the voice comes from the same middle aged goat who’s gesture to sit started off this debriefing, a masculine voice as it turns out.

“Of course sir. Rico, codename Swift Aqueous.”

“Howell, codename Solar Striker.”

“Oliver, codename Atmo-Blaster.”

“Very good. Now discussion of the assignment may commence.”

“Yes sir. The mission started at the Seattle Sea Market after a short uneventful drive to reach it in one of UMBRA’s provided rental vans. We were called there by a Mister Eddie Montana, an Osprey, to investigate the haunting of an underwater castle on behalf of the fish who used the building for recreational activities. We spoke to Mister Montana for several minutes to obtain the details on this haunting such as...”

Rico goes on to list all the details of what happened with Howell corroborating these details or interjecting as needed and Ollie mostly just waiting for the seals to get to his part in all this so he can speak as well. As predicted the debriefing is long but there’s not as much worry and annoyance at the prospect of it as there was before as Rico, Howell and Ollie all handle it like the pros they are. Which means the very last leg of their assignment is over and done with by all accounts. For all three involved it was something different to each of them; for Ollie it was an almost standard rescue mission and drive back to HQ, for Rico it was an unexpectedly challenging field mission and near death experience and for Howell it was an assignment in confronting his inner demons and an outer one as well in the form of a terrifying and deadly familiar enemy that he was able to finally overcome with his new level of practiced power, some teamwork and a drive to not re experience the past. Each of them was able to power through the assignment and overcome the familiar in both its predictable and terrifying forms.

The End